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STATE FOR IO/RHS, DRL/MLGA, EUR/PGI AND EUR/AGS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/08/2017

TAGS: PHUM PREL UNHRC AU

SUBJECT: UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL -- AUSTRIA OPPOSES BELARUS CANDIDACY, SEEKS WAYS TO BLOCK ELECTION

REF: STATE 58036

Classified By: Economic-Political Counselor Gregory E. Phillips. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) EconPolCouns delivered reftel demarche on May 8 to Engelbert Theuermann, the head of the Austrian MFA's Human Rights Bureau.

¶2. (C) Theuermann said that while EU lobbying efforts on the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) did not name Belarus, the criteria that the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC) had adopted clearly precluded EU member state support for the Belarus candidacy. The PSC adopted an internal paper specifying that EU member states would not support the HRC candidacies of countries guilty of gross and systemic human rights violations, especially those against whom the EU has adopted restrictive measures. Theuermann said this meant that "no EU state will vote for Belarus."

¶3. (C) Theuermann said EU lobbying efforts in the UN reflected the PSC decision. A letter to all UN member states in late February noted that the General Assembly had decided that HRC members should uphold "the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights." It added, "the EU will therefore only cast its vote in favor of those candidates who meet these standards and who contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights. We would like to call upon each Member State of the United Nations to also adhere to these agreed standards." Germany (as the EU Presidency country), Britain and France were active in organizing demarches in capitals around the world, Theuermann added.

⁴ (C) Naming Belarus would be counterproductive, Theuermann said, because the Belarus UN ambassador is well-established and well-liked. An explicit campaign against Belarus could well cause the "south" to "gang up" to support him.

¶5. (C) Realistically, Theuermann said, we could not count on a third candidate emerging from the Eastern European region before May 17. Austria was working toward a scenario in which Belarus would fail to win an absolute majority on the first round, while Slovenia would get in. Hopefully, the Belarus vote count would be embarrassingly low in comparison to that of Slovenia. In subsequent rounds, Austria hoped informal agreement could arise on a replacement candidate for Belarus. Theuermann stressed that the Austrian delegation wanted to work closely with the U.S. delegation in New York.
McCaw